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Robert Dean, K.A. Cuordileone, Janet Farrell Brodie, Kathryn S. Olmsted. *Special Forum: Cultures of Secrecy in Postwar America*. *Diplomatic History* 35:4 (September 2011): 611-705.
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Review by **Walter L. Hixson**, University of Akron

S hhhh! I've got a secret! Okay, not really, nobody tells me anything but I and others at least were able to learn some things about secrecy from the *Diplomatic History* forum, "Cultures of Secrecy in Postwar America."

Nicely introduced by Robert Dean, the forum features articles by K.A. Cuordileone on American communism and the Venona controversy; Janet Farrell Brodie on the RAND Corporation and the early Cold War; and Kathryn S. Olmstead on "citizen sleuths," the Kennedy assassination, and 9/11 conspiracy theories. Paul Boyer and Jonathan Winkler supply brief commentaries on the articles.

Everyone likes secrets. That's part of the reason they are generated and carefully guarded, but the authors of course go beyond this simple explanation. Cuordileone deserves praise for offering the best and most up to date analysis of the history of American communism, anti-communism, and espionage in the wake of the Venona document release and the controversy that it generated. This is the best single article for scholars, students, and the public to read on this complex and controversial history.

Cuordileone is well informed and makes a real effort to balance "traditionalist" and "revisionist" views that have raged in the aftermath of the Venona "revelations" of the 1990s. I place "revelations" in quotes because there was nothing revelatory to certain people, in both Moscow and Washington, who had kept these secrets for decades. U.S. bureaucrats withheld the documents (even from President Truman) that showed far more extensive Soviet espionage in the United States than previously known and in addition went a long way toward identifying certain Americans (Alger Hiss for example) as Soviet agents. Cuordileone rightfully condemns this secrecy, which shaped the course of history. Beyond question the history of "McCarthyism" and the Cold War would have

been different—in some ways perhaps worse and in others no doubt better--had national security elites been honest with the people they are paid to serve.

Rather than re-hashing the entire Venona discussion here suffice it to say Cuordileone presents it well and offers judicious conclusions that are well worth reading and considering. I have two issues with his piece, one superfluous but worth mentioning, the other more directly relevant to the secrecy forum. The superfluous one is a reference (p. 631) to the decision by “North Korea to invade South Korea.” Why do we bother to study and read the complex origins of the Korean War, pioneered by Bruce Cumings but now explored by many others as well, only to settle for this misleading clichéd formula, one that reifies Cold War orthodoxy (this may answer my question) when we reference it?

The more directly relevant issue I have with Cuordileone’s piece is insufficient attention to and analysis (there is some) of what I believe to be the most important legacy of “McCarthyism”: the destruction of the American left. Allusions to “the left” in the United States are bitterly humorous to me: there is no coherent left in America today and the purge of it combined with the Cold War and national security state are the reasons for it. This explanation helps account for the decision to keep Venona secret. If the extent of communist espionage had been made known, McCarthy, Hoover, and the FBI may not have been able to ruin the lives of so many ordinary left-wing (and/or gay and lesbian) Americans and drive the left into oblivion, leaving behind the center-right national security and warfare state that we live in today. Clearly American Communists were naïve and slavish to the Soviet Union but that is not a crime and neither is it espionage. Moreover, as Cuordileone notes almost all the damage was already done by the end of the *Allied* victory (that is, let’s not forget, with Russia on our side) in World War II.

Brodie’s piece effectively narrates the secrecy embedded in the core mission of RAND from its inception in the early postwar years. The history of RAND reflects the marriage between civilians, scientists, academicians, and the national security state. The article shows that the level of secrecy was unprecedented and embedded in the structure and ideology of the Santa Monica “think tank” and its warfare state sponsors. It was doubly ironic then, that RAND inspired the most sensational challenge to the secrecy of the national security state (at least until Wikileaks), namely, the Pentagon Papers case.

In some ways the most engaging of the three articles is the one not coincidentally whose title (“The Truth is Out There”) comes from the popular television series about government secrecy, the *X-Files* (of which I confess never to having seen even a single episode). Olmstead shows how secrecy, especially in the machinations of the Warren Commission, fed distrust of government, which has become almost pathological today (and to our peril). The Warren Commission got the story right—examined rationally the evidence reveals that Oswald acted alone--but carefully contained the investigation out of fear that CIA assassination plots, coups, drug testing, and other sordid secret activities would come to light. Olmstead’s point is that government secrecy backfired by creating

massive distrust of government to the point that a vast segment of the American public is silly enough to believe that the U.S. “secret government” orchestrated the 9/11 attacks.

All of these authors and the two commentators unsurprisingly come out in opposition to excessive government secrecy. These pieces show that such secrecy is not only undemocratic it is destructive. Winkler did not have much space to craft a response or undoubtedly his prescription for “simply a smaller, less powerful federal government” (705) would not sound so glib. I assume his prescription encompasses a smaller *national security state*, which is what we really need, and not the deregulated federal state that the Tea Partiers want so that, in the immortal words of David Stockman, budget director under Ronald Reagan “the hogs” can keep on “really feeding.”¹ But given the caliber of debate in Washington today, in which representatives on both sides of the aisle refuse to cut ‘defense’ spending that they insist would jeopardize ‘our national security,’ the prospects of meaningful reform appear dismal.

It’s no secret that we remain firmly in the grip of a sprawling national security and warfare state that shows no signs of abating.

Walter L. Hixson, distinguished professor of history, University of Akron, is author of, most recently, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Yale, 2008). He is working on a history of U.S. settler colonialism and indiscriminate warfare.

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¹ William Greider ["The Education of David Stockman"](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/198112/david-stockman). The Atlantic, December 1981, online. <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/198112/david-stockman>.